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Item on WASL to be removed after complaints

By Linda Shaw

Seattle Times staff reporter

A chapter from a novel used on this year's Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) will not be used on future exams after a student complained it was offensive to Latinos.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson and her staff on Thursday reviewed the selection, from "Breaking Through," the second of two books about a migrant family in California in the 1950s.

Bergeson determined it should not have been on the test without a note about when it took place, spokesman Thomas Shapley said.

A number of Latino groups, including the Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs, were upset that a passage that reinforced stereotypes about Latinos could have ended up on the reading part of the exam, given to 10th-graders last week.

"Breaking Through" is a fictionalized memoir by Francisco Jiménez, an author and professor at Santa Clara University in California. The main character is a youth who works summers in the strawberry fields with his father for low wages — about \$1 per hour. Their employer comes to visit their house and makes a reference to another worker being deported.

Students were asked to read the passage and answer questions about it.

"For awhile, we've been saying that the WASL is not culturally relevant," said Uriel Iñiguez, the Hispanic affairs commission's executive director. "This just proves it."

Citizen committees review all WASL exams for cultural bias. The panel that looked at the excerpt in question recommended it not be used without a note about the year in which it was set, said Cenobio Macias, one of the panel members.

Macias, a retired Tacoma teacher, said the committee recognized that the passage included stereotypes but concluded it could be used if its timeframe was made clear.

"If the introductory paragraph didn't do that, it shouldn't have been included," he said.

The introduction said only that the passage chronicles the experiences of a son of migrant workers.

The student reportedly complained to a group called the Parent Empowerment Network, headed by Juanita Doyon, a longtime critic of the WASL and high-stakes testing. Doyon declined to identify him, saying only that he is Latino, the son of someone she's known a long time, and lives on the west side of the state.

She distributed an e-mail she said she asked him to write about the selection. The e-mail said he found the passage "extremely offensive" and that he wasn't able to start the test for about 10 minutes. The message also said he feared that students across the state would conclude that Mexicans are "all working for nothing and being deported for no plain reason." Friends snickered at him after the test, he wrote.

The passage was a pilot question last year, Shapley said, and no concerns were raised about it then.

The full novel is used in classrooms throughout the state, he said, and teachers "have great things to say about it." It has won several awards, including the Pura Belpré Award, given to writers who best portray, affirm and celebrate the Latino cultural experience.

But teaching a full novel is different from including an isolated excerpt on a test, representatives of several Latino groups said.

The commission fears that the item could reinforce stereotypes that all Latinos are farm workers and/or illegal immigrants.

"Every day we battle this type of stereotype," Iñiguez said. "When it's reinforced in a statewide exam, it really doesn't help."

The process used to review the WASL needs to be revised, he said, and more ethnic minorities need to serve on the bias and fairness panels.

Maria Rodriguez-Salazar, Northwest vice president for the League of United Latin American Citizens, a national civil-rights group, said her group has forwarded the information to its legal team.

Doyon wants OSPI to invalidate the entire test. "If that question is anywhere near the front of the test, it's going to affect the entire test," she said.

Macias wasn't sure he remembered the excerpt in question until told his panel had recommended it not be used without an introduction.

He said the panel concluded that it was "a salvageable item with proper explanation." With a note that it was set in the 1950s, he said, the committee thought it would be clear that "not all Latinos fit into that mold."

Along with removing the items from future exams, OSPI officials also say they'll review the performance of Latino students on the questions about the passage on this year's exam. If that indicates the passage could have affected their performance, those questions might not count.

Questions have been dropped from the WASL before. In 2001, OSPI removed a math question after some students realized that the answer sounded like the name "Mary K. Letourneau," a former teacher convicted of raping one of her students.

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